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ABSTRACT

Holocaust denial, like hate speech in general, is reaching far larger audiences on the World Wide Web that it was ever able to do in the past. The Internet is the most free press imaginable, and Holocaust deniers can publish their works as widely as they like and construct their message in any way they choose--they have great latitude when constructing their ethos, both academic ethos and "techno-ethos." When academic ethos is at work, a reader is convinced that the writer is a rational, reasonable, intelligent individual who is engaging in an honest dialogue with his or her audience. This is important for Holocaust deniers such as the Institute for Historical Review. Their mission statement displays a "scholarly," academic ethos which an instructor can use for discussions of Holocaust denial and of academic ethos in the classroom. The Committee for the Open Discussion of the Holocaust Story (CODOH), however, epitomizes techno-ethos and maintains a Web site filled with color, both easy-to-read and visually appealing. CODOH relies on the public's blanket acceptance of well packaged information on the Web to lend credibility to its view of the "Holocaust Story." Discussing Holocaust denial in the classroom may not be something that all teachers are comfortable with, but the Internet must be discussed. Composition teachers will spend endless energy teaching students to read critically; students also need to be taught how to "surf" critically. (Contains seven references.) (NKA)

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Ethics, Dialogue, and Denial: Responding to Anti-Semitic Discourse on the Web

When my students aren't writing on gun control, euthanasia, or abortion, they often gravitate towards the newest member of cliched first-year composition issues: censorship of the internet. Generally, these arguments focus on an old issue, pornography, in a new medium. The issue of porn vs. art isn't new for either teachers or students. But the Web has brought one issue further into the public sphere than did television or the print medium: Holocaust denial, like hate speech in general, is reaching far larger audiences on the Web than it was ever able to do in the past. It is this site of contention—Holocaust denial on the Web—which I will focus on today.

First, however, some parallels need to be drawn between television and the Internet. The debates that are taking place about the Internet are very similar to debates that took place forty years ago over television. Reduced to simple binaries, as debates often are, the questions about television were

1. Will TV bring families together or will it tear them apart?
2. Will TV educate children or will it make them incapable of sustained, linear thought?
3. Will TV educate kids or will it blind them and deform their teeth and jaws (as one orthodontist suggested in an issue of *TV Guide* from 1953?

Ultimately, the debate is the same reductive question we still ask today: Is TV a good thing or a bad thing?

The debates over the Internet are very similar to those over television:

1. Will the Internet bring us together as a Global Village or further isolate us?
2. Will the Internet educate children or make their thinking shallow?
3. Will the Internet educate or simply entertain children while it ruins their eyes?

Again, the debate seems to boil down to the question "Is the Internet a good thing or a bad thing?" As with television, the question may be largely irrelevant. Television has gone from being in only a fraction of American homes in 1950 (Spigel 1) to being in 98% of homes in 1998. In 1990, less than 5% of Americans were connected to the Internet; in 1998 it is estimated that as many as 20% of Americans have access to the Internet. Like television, the 'Net seems to be here to stay—regardless of any debate.

When it comes to hate speech—including Holocaust denial—however, the two mediums are very different. Television is a market-driven medium. It entertains to attract viewers who can then be shown commercials; therefore, television must appeal to the largest possible audience to be profitable. Holocaust denial has little place in such a setting. As Neil Postman writes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "For television—bless its heart—is not congenial to messages of naked hate. For one thing, you never know who is watching, so it is best not to be wildly offensive" (116). Thus Holocaust deniers are only regularly allowed access to one type of television programming, the talk show—where being wildly offensive is often the entire point.

So Holocaust deniers have little access to television—and to the 98% of Americans who own a television. The same was true, although to a lesser extent, with the print medium. Publishers prefer books with wide audience appeal, and few messages of naked hate have such appeal. (Two notable exceptions are Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and

Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*.) But hatred can thrive on the 'Net. It is the most free press imaginable, and Holocaust deniers can publish their works as widely as they like. While their message on television, when it is there at all, is mediated by a reporter, producers, talk-show host, etc., the deniers' message can be constructed on the Web in any way they choose. This freedom allows them great latitude when constructing their ethos.

When I talk about ethos with my students, I have found it useful to divide ethos into two separate, sometimes overlapping types: academic ethos and techno-ethos. The first is the ethos with which we are all familiar while the second is still in the process of evolving. Holocaust deniers, at times, effectively use both.

Academic ethos is the traditional, print-based ethos that is constructed through linear argumentation. When academic ethos is at work, a reader is convinced that the writer is a rational, reasonable, intelligent individual who is engaging in an honest dialogue with his or her audience. Academic ethos, then, has Aristotelian overtones—readers must believe that a writer is being ethical, being fair and honest in the construction of his or her argument. For Holocaust deniers the construction of such an ethos is enormously important. Briefly, let me cite two examples, both of which I have chosen because of their prominence in the public sphere: the work of Dr. Arthur Butz at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and the Mission Statement of the Institute for Historical Review.

On the surface, Dr. Butz appears credible. He is an associate professor at a major university, and he is the author of a lengthy work on Holocaust denial: *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: the Case against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry.* This makes him a perfect place to begin a discussion of Holocaust denial and ethos

construction with students. As Deborah Lipstadt, the foremost American expert on Holocaust denial, writes,

> Butz's position as a professor at one of the more prestigious universities in the country enhanced the sense of controversy [his book generated]. It was hard for the public to reconcile Holocaust denial with the pursuit of truth to which universities and their faculty are supposedly dedicated. (123)

Dr. Butz possesses and effectively uses academic ethos. His book is lengthy, almost 400 pages counting appendices, which, combined with his title, is enough to convince some people that his ideas must have merit. More importantly, though, Butz plays off of the popular conception that knowledge is value-free and disconnected from ideologies. As he writes in the introduction to his text, which I often share with students,

> There will be those who will say that I am not qualified to undertake such a work and there will even be those who will say that I have no right to publish such things. So be it. If a scholar, regardless of his specialty, perceives that scholarship is acquiescing, from whatever motivation, in a monstrous lie, then it is his duty to expose the lie, whatever his qualifications. (8)

Butz presents himself as a scholar engaged in the pursuit of truth, a truth which stands in opposition to the accepted version of the history of the Holocaust.

On the Web, Dr. Butz relies on the same strategy to construct his ethos. His site is simple and unadorned. Beneath his name, and before the copyright, Butz identifies himself as an "Associate Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering" and names

the university at which he works. With no fanfare, Butz identifies himself as the author of a book on "Holocaust revisionism." The reference to his published work and to his profession serve to construct Butz's ethos on the web; he relies on traditional, familiar means. What makes the site interesting, and worth showing to students despite its lack of technological refinement, is the second full sentence: "This Web site exists for the purpose of expressing views that are outside the purview of my role as an Electrical Engineering faculty member." This is the point where, as one of my students wrote, Butz's "professor's mask slips a little." The line reads like exactly what it is: a disclaimer put in for legal purposes. For critical web surfers, this has a direct effect on Butz's credibility. As a web site, Butz's quickly exhausts its usefulness in the composition classroom. A group with which Butz is loosely affiliated, however, has a web site that provides much more fuel for classroom discussion: the Institute for Historical Review. Although this group's web site is rather large, in the interest of time I have chosen to focus on only one document the IHR presents, its mission statement.

In the first line of the "Record and Mission of the Institute for Historical Review," the IHR begins creating its scholarly, academic ethos: "Founded in 1978, the Institute for Historical Review (publisher of the Journal [of Historical Review]) is a not-for-profit research, educational and publishing center devoted to truth and accuracy in history." They continue this reasonable approach to ethos construction: "The IHR continues the tradition of historical revisionism pioneered by distinguished historians such as Harry Elmer Barnes, A. J. P. Taylor, Charles Tansill, Paul Rassinier and William H. Chamberlin." This is the document's opening paragraph, a mere two sentences in which the tone for the IHR's ethos construction is powerfully set.

When I have shared this paragraph with students, they have generally responded positively to the group's ethos construction. As one student wrote in his journal, "I didn't know who any of the historians the IHR mentioned were, but I figured someone did. By associating themselves with these other historians, even though I didn't know them, the group gained some credibility."

There is a subtext to the IHR's mission statement, though, which students rarely miss. This subtext becomes clear when the Simon Wiesenthal Center is mentioned:

> In addition [to attacks from the Jewish Defense League], well-financed special interest groups seeking to curtail open discussion of vital historical issues have for years targeted the Institute, grossly misrepresenting its work and purpose. Prominent among these are the Simon Wiesenthal Center (Los Angeles) and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (New York)—stridently partisan organizations with well documented records as staunch apologists for narrow Zionist-Jewish interests.

In passages such as this, the academic ethos of the IHR begins to crumble. When the IHR writes of "narrow Zionist-Jewish interests" its ideology slides through its ethos.

Both the Institute for Historical Review and Dr. Butz present opportunities for discussions of Holocaust denial and of academic ethos in the classroom, but neither of them provide good examples of what I have termed *techno-ethos*. Neither Butz nor the IHR take advantage of the new medium; instead, they treat the web like an extension of the traditional print medium, and they construct their ethos in traditional ways—with plain fonts on a plain background. One group of deniers, however, does understand the

possibilities of the web: CODOH, the Committee for Open Discussion of the Holocaust Story.

The CODOH web site has everything that the other two revisionist sites I have discussed do not. Articles and a mission statement are present on CODOH's site, thus allowing them to construct an academic ethos as Butz and the IHR do, but the majority of CODOH's ethos is constructed through technological means.

CODOH's site is filled with color—in the background and the text. It is both easy to read and visually appealing. Various sizes of font are used, some of them three-dimensional. Frames break the page up, and helpful menus are everywhere. Pictures are also heavily used: a bald eagle at the top of the page, Samuel Johnson, Bradley Smith (the director of CODOH) himself. On the first page a surfer sees, a counter reports that more than 500,000 people have accessed CODOH's home page. CODOH's site is, as one student wrote in her journal, "alive in a way that a printed page can't be." CODOH understands the possibilities of the web, and the group makes use of them. CODOH's message, unlike those of Butz and the IHR, is being continuously revised to fit the new technology. Their ethos, in part, is constructed through their effective and creative use of the available technology.

After I had viewed the CODOH site with my students, one of them, a man who designs web pages for a living, made this statement during a conference in my office: "On the Internet, you don't have to worry about constructing your ethos like you do in an argument, and no one can see what you really look like. Just put it out there so it looks good, no matter what you say." Just as Butz and the IHR rely on the "search for truth" defense to justify their denial, CODOH, it seems, relies on the public's blanket-

acceptance of well-packaged information that is on the web to lend credibility to its view of the "Holocaust Story."

To conclude, I would like to say this: Discussing Holocaust denial in the classroom may not be something all teachers are comfortable with, and it's certainly a topic that should be approached carefully, but the Internet must be discussed in the classroom. Let me quote from Postman again:

> Although I believe the computer to be a vastly overrated technology, I mention it here because, clearly, Americans have accorded it their customary mindless inattention. . . . Thus, a central thesis of computer technology—that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data—will go unexamined. (161)

I think this is exactly what's happening. "The Information Age" and "The Information Superhighway" have both become such common expressions that they are used daily everywhere from Presidential speeches to television commercials. The underlying assumption, of course, is that information is value-neutral and ideologically unencumbered, that the facts somehow speak for themselves. As composition teachers, we spend endless energy teaching students to read critically. Many of us push our students to watch television critically. Now we need to teach them to surf critically. Television may be a nearly inescapable part of modern life, but the role of the Internet in society is still being negotiated. As teachers, we must be—and we must teach our students to be—critical participants in those negotiations. The point where ethos construction, Holocaust denial, and the Internet intersect is a good place to start.

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